Dancing the Buckles off Their Shoes in Pioneer Utah

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Walk Along John to Kansas

A typical quadrille tune. Favoring by the pioneers of the Little Colorado (Arizona) Mission, this tune—sometimes known as “Rabbit, Where’s Your Mammy?”—features a nonstandard tuning. Transcription courtesy Larry V. Shumway.
Dancing the Buckles off Their Shoes in Pioneer Utah

Endorsed by Mormon leaders as a healthy and uplifting activity, dancing served the important functions of revitalizing the pioneers’ spirits and nurturing their sense of community.

Larry V. Shumway

In 1997 we paused to pay tribute to the pioneer settlers who came to the desolate Great Basin area and laid the groundwork for the life that Utahns now enjoy. In our modern American society, we are surrounded by trappings that, by comparison with the lives of those early settlers, make our lives seem luxurious and opulent. In our more appreciative moments, we wonder at the magnificence of human spirit that the pioneers exhibited in their struggles against all odds to carve a meaningful and civilized life out of a forbidding wilderness.

Of the many factors contributing to the pioneer successes, I will consider here but two—dance and its associated music. The records left by the pioneers make it clear that dance and dance music played a more significant role in the successful pioneering of Utah and outlying areas than is generally acknowledged.

From the viewpoint of our present society, we might not accord dancing and music a very high status on our list of substantial factors contributing to the development of Utah. Music permeates our modern environment through radio, recordings, live music, and the background music in television, movies, and other ubiquitous forms of entertainment. Being surrounded by so much music in so many forms makes it hard for us to imagine the musical void of pioneer times, when wresting a living from the land consumed so much time and energy that there was scant time and little opportunity for music. We have difficulty understanding the
hunger the pioneers felt for music or seeing the role music and dancing played in relieving the harshness of their living conditions and in developing the sense of community common to Mormon settlements.

What music there was, was highly prized, and, in pioneer journals and other accounts, we find people speaking of music with great warmth and expressing delight at finding someone who could play an instrument or sing. In the developing period of pioneer Utah, music and dance, in a very real sense, were essential elements of the grease that helped the rough wheels of pioneer life turn more smoothly.

From the pioneer era well into this century, most community musical activity centered around dancing—sometimes done in the open air but more often in homes or public buildings. In urban areas, such as Salt Lake City and Ogden, public halls dedicated to dancing and theatricals were built quite early and were heavily patronized. Out in the rural settlements, people danced first in homes, then churches and schools, and later in public halls. Dances were held regularly, usually on Friday evening, but were also given in connection with any number of national and local celebrations and events—the Fourth of July, Twenty-fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, election eve, harvesttime, barn raisings, and even ball games or school plays. In addition to the dancing and convivial atmosphere, many people were interested in the music itself and would attend a dance simply to listen.

To be sure, musical entertainments other than dancing were to be found as well—in private or informal evenings at home with family and friends or in the more formal settings of socials, picnics, and holiday programs. The fiddle was the most commonly used instrument, providing music both for dancing and for listening.

The following three diary entries tell of a fiddler cheering folks in the evening and describe typical situations: In his autobiography, Warren Foote remembers, “There was an old Bachelor boarding with the family I boarded with, and . . . [he] was a fiddler, and we used to have considerable fun during the long winter evenings.” Hosea Stout reports, “I then came to A. J. Stout and took supper and then came to Br J. P Harmons and after some talk, he and Br L. W. Hancock came home with me. . . . Br Hancock
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having his fiddle played on it for about one hour and a half to our satisfaction. We had an agreeable evening." Toward the end of the pioneer period, from Snowflake, Arizona, we have the following: “As good a cowhand as he [Frank Pruitt] was, his true image was that of a fiddler, sitting on a wagon tongue at day’s end, cheering the souls of music-hungry riders of the range.”

In addition to the fiddle, growing numbers of pianos and reed organs could be found in the homes of more settled areas. Evening get-togethers around the piano or organ with friends or the extended family were common. More formal occasions, such as a Twenty-fourth of July program, might feature brass-band music and speeches interspersed with other musical numbers by choirs, soloists, a string band, or perhaps other instruments typical of the frontier—fiddles, guitars, banjos, and harmonicas.

Social Dance in Nineteenth-Century America

In mid-nineteenth-century America, dancing had a spotted reputation at best. Given the strict Christian underpinnings of Utah pioneer society, many may find it remarkable that dancing was a widespread, Church-sanctioned activity. However, in this penchant for dancing, the pioneers shared much with the larger society, where, since the late eighteenth century, dancing had become a popular form of entertainment.

Prior to the Revolutionary War, country dances, whose origins go back to the peasant dancing of medieval Europe, were popular among the lower classes in the new colonies. The upper classes danced the minuet and gavotte, imitating the courtly balls popular in Europe, but also enjoyed genteel versions of traditional country dances. After the Revolutionary War, courtly dancing declined because of its strong association with monarchy and privilege, while the various forms of country dancing—both genteel and popular—continued. The popular forms of country dancing, however, were not accepted by the upper classes, who did not consider them to be refined, nor were they usually done in reputable places. Indeed, as Charles Hamm points out, “in almost every mention of country dancing, there is a link to some sort of impropriety: drinking, gambling, intimacy between the sexes.”
Thus, dancing in public places came in for heavy criticism by numerous moralists and the clergy, a response that, in one form or another, has continued to the present time. In New England in particular, dancing was severely frowned on, the belief being that people should be continuously occupied with work so as not to be drawn into vain amusements of the world that would surely entice them to greater temptations and lead, finally, to the loss of their souls to sin. The clergy condemned not only dancing, but almost any other pastime that appeared to give worldly pleasure.

An interesting exchange in the *Philadelphia Minerva* highlights the extremes people would go to in their arguments for and against dancing. One writer states that “dancing was calculated to eradicate solid thought. . . . In fact, versatility of mind, hatred for study, or sober reflection, are the inseparable companions of dancing schools, and the miseries resulting from them are virtually incalculable.” In reply another writer countered:

Dancing is incontestably an elegant and amiable accomplishment; it confers grace and dignity of carriage upon the female sex, . . . it invigorates the constitution, enlivens the role of the cheek, and in its results operates as silent eloquence upon the hearts of men. Nature gives us limbs, and art teaches us to use them.\(^8\)

The dance forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were basically figure or pattern dances, most commonly called cotillions or quadrilles. Some of the step patterns could be quite complicated, and, as these dance forms gradually became more acceptable, dancing masters began to appear in many eastern cities and towns to give the necessary instruction. Since many of the step patterns were hard to remember, the practice of one of the musicians calling out the figures arose in the early nineteenth century. This custom helped the dancers considerably, probably making dancing more fun and more accessible to the general population.

The dance music included many traditional Scottish and Irish tunes. With the appearance of dancing masters came collections of music to be used, a number of which are still extant. Many of them contain tunes transcribed for the piano and show a simplified melody line with a rudimentary harmony line in the bass clef. This description does not mean the music of the pioneers was
simple—traditional fiddle tunes that survive today show a singular musical sophistication, often featuring interesting tunes as well as rhythmic and ornamental nuances that almost defy notation.

Although censure against dancing was particularly strong in Puritan New England, dance was tolerated there by high society, sometimes even with a grudging approval on the grounds that it could be something of an art form that would give a certain elegance and polish to the young lady or gentleman. Proponents argued that dancing would teach the youth genteel manners and give them a graceful carriage and bearing as well as a sense of social self-confidence. Curiously, the ministers accepted men dancing in their own company and women in theirs, but still forbade mixed dancing. In spite of this condemnation, however, “the people of New England continued the practice [of mixed dancing] and ‘people of quality’ began to give balls.”

In the South, where religion traditionally had exercised less of a normative influence, the belief in the salutary effect of dancing in the development of character and good breeding was carried even further. In this region, the migration to America had been more for economic than religious reasons, and the resulting wealth and sense of class required of its people a social polish that included fashionable and graceful dancing. Thus, dancing became an educational must for the gentleman or gentlewoman. Grand balls became gracious affairs to showcase the graceful gentility of upper-class breeding, and mixed dancing was very much accepted. Dances encompassed all the trappings of high society the new country could muster.

About this time in England, dancing had become very popular among the middle class, and as large numbers of immigrants came to the United States from the British Isles, those tastes accompanied them to the New World. For them, dancing was seen as a good form of recreation.

During the nineteenth century, despite the persistent climate of religious censure, mixed social dancing became acceptable throughout most of American society. In many areas, the population was sparse and spread out, and an occasion for dancing was something looked forward to and savored for as long as possible.
Very often dancing went far into the night, sometimes right up until morning. In 1824, in Franklin, Ohio, Luman Shurtleff records:

In November there was a quilting in the neighborhood to which the ladies were invited to quilt in the afternoon and the men to chop wood. At evening we had a good supper and then a dance. I was one of the guests. There were more ladies than gents and I danced most of the night.¹¹

The sociality of such occasions nurtured something of a sense of community, and the people returned home much refreshed, both physically and psychologically. On the other hand, dancing sometimes led to overly exuberant celebration and disruptive behavior, fueled by consumption of liquor, which seemed to bear out the contention of the persistent critics of dancing—that it was an activity surely leading to sin and all its consequences.¹²

**Dancing among the Early Mormons**

Because many early members of the Church came from the strict religious traditions that looked with disfavor on dancing, the widespread practice of dancing among the Mormon pioneers is very surprising. Equally surprising is that the person who, more than any other, shaped the Mormon view of dancing and gave it its peculiar stamp of approval was Brigham Young. President Young was a New Englander, raised in a strict household where “to listen to the sound of a violin was an unforgivable sin.”¹³ Yet, as Elizabeth Haven Barlow notes, “later President Young became a wonderful dancer and loved all sorts of art and music.”¹⁴

The issues surrounding social dance among the early Mormons were complex. A journal entry made by Gilbert Belnap, who moved to Kirtland and was eventually baptized in 1842, illustrates the negative attitude toward dancing that existed among many Christians in the 1840s:

Prior to my arrival in Kirtland, the forces of my education had taught me to detest the slightest variation from morality in a religion of any kind. The minister that would participate in the dance or in many other amusements was discarded by his fellows and looked upon by the unbelieving world as a hypocrite and deserved to be cast without the kingdom.¹⁵
A similar attitude is apparent from the following incident in which official Church action was threatened against Benjamin F. Johnson for supposedly participating in dancing:

In the early spring of 1838 an effort was made by the local authorities to draw the line of fellowship on practices which then seemed tending to demoralize, among which was dancing and late night associations, to which little heed was paid; and soon a long list of names was left with the High Council to be dealt with, and notice was given to each by its clerk. I had never danced, and rarely attended a party, but from some cause my name was in the list, and I received notice to appear and answer. I answered by letter in a spirit of meekness, . . . and this spirit was conveyed to the hearts of the council, and they said Brother Benjamin’s letter was satisfactory and carried with it a purpose to be a true Latter-day Saint.16

Quite the opposite attitude, however, is seen in the writings of Elizabeth Whitney, wife of a prominent early Church leader, who says the following about her childhood:

I was the eldest child, and grew up in an atmosphere of love and tenderness. I received all the advantages of education, such as young ladies usually enjoyed at that time, and was taught dancing among other things, which, in the religious world in that day, was not considered orthodox. My parents were not members of any church, and they wished me to enjoy life, and thought dancing added grace and easiness to one’s manner.17

Dancing parties were common among the Mormons during the Nauvoo period (1839–46), which, given the varying background and expectations of its citizens, raised some real questions in the minds of many about the propriety of the practice. In an 1844 letter to the editor of the Times and Seasons, “a father and elder in Israel” requests a clarification of the Church stance on dancing:

DEAR SIR: As you are placed as a watchman in Zion, and your opinion is respected by the members of the church, I should be very much gratified by your informing me, and not only me, but the public, through the medium of your valuable paper, the Times and Seasons, what your views are in regard to balls and dancing, as it has lately existed in our city. . . . I make the request . . . as I am the father of a family, having both sons and daughters, over whom the great God has placed me as a father and a watchman, and to whom I feel responsible for the conduct of my children . . . I feel desirous to know what to teach my children. . . . There are many others who
possess the same feelings as myself, and who would feel highly gratified by an expression from you relative to this subject.\textsuperscript{18}

The reply from the editor, probably written by Elder John Taylor, was included in the same issue and began with the following observation:

We have always considered that there existed on the minds of the religious community, a great deal of unnecessary superstition in relation to dancing, but perhaps this feeling is engendered more through other associations and evils connected with it, than from the thing itself. There certainly can be no harm in dancing in and of itself, as an abstract principle, but like all other athletic exercises, it has a tendency to invigorate the system and to promote health. . . . Therefore, looking at dancing merely as an athletic exercise, or as something having a tendency to add to the grace and dignity of man, by enabling him to have a more easy and graceful attitude, certainly no one could object to it. So much then for dancing as a science.\textsuperscript{19}

The editor traces the record of dancing in the scriptures, quoting from 2 Samuel 6:13–15, where David dances before the Lord with all his might. He then observes that while dancing “was adopted for the purpose of celebrating the praise of God,” the dancing of the day was not that kind, for “we never heard God’s name praised, nor his glory exalted in any of them. Nor do we think that there is the least desire to glorify God in the dancing of the present day . . . and that it has not a tendency to glorify God, or to benefit mankind.” In conclusion, he reiterates the neutrality of dancing and focuses rather on the contexts of time and place:

As an abstract principle . . . we have no objections to [dancing]; but when it leads people into bad company and causes them to keep untimely hours, it has a tendency to enervate and weaken the system, and lead to profligate and intemperate habits. And so far as it does this, so far it is injurious to society, and corrupting to the morals of youth. Solomon says that “there is a time to dance:” but that time is not at eleven or twelve o’clock at night, nor at one, two, three or four o’clock in the morning.\textsuperscript{20}

Three ideas emerge from the editor’s reply, which formed the basis for later policies governing dancing in Mormon Utah pioneer communities: First, dancing, as an exercise, tends to “invigorate” the body and promote health and well-being if done in moderation. Second, dancing has a “tendency to add to the grace and dignity of
man, by enabling him to have a more easy and graceful attitude." And third, dancing, illustrated in the scriptural record as a "part of the service to God," should be conducted in a proper atmosphere of piety and loving sociality, without which the evils stemming from dance, as per its critics, could become a real possibility.

That such a proper atmosphere was lacking in some of the dances at that time is apparent from a reminiscence of a young girl denied the opportunity of attending a dancing party because of a warning to her father from Joseph Smith about dubious company in attendance:

During the winter of 1843, there were plenty of parties and balls, and many were held at the [Nauvoo] Mansion. The last one that I attended there that winter, was on Christmas Eve. Some of the young gentlemen got up a series of dancing parties to be held at the Mansion once a week. . . . I had to stay at home, as my father had been warned by the Prophet to keep his daughter away from there, because of the blacklegs and certain ones of questionable character who attended there . . . but I felt quite sore over it. . . . for no girl loved dancing better than I did, and I really felt that it was too much to bear.21

After the assassination of Joseph Smith, Church leaders felt the need to discourage worldliness and excess of frivolity, believing that dancing and other amusements had the tendency to distract people from the real and pressing needs of the hour. These grim and somber times prompted a sternly worded epistle from the Council of the Twelve over the signature of Brigham Young. The letter was published in the Times and Seasons and pointed the Saints' attention to what was required of them:

In order to do this [build the kingdom] we must not only be industrious and honest . . . but we must abstain from all intemperance, immorality and vice of whatever name or nature; we must set an example of virtue, modesty, temperance, continency, cleanliness and charity. And be careful not to mingle in the vain amusements and sins of the world. . . . Among the most conspicuous and fashionable of these we might mention, balls, dances, corrupt and immodest theatrical exhibitions, magical performances, etc., all of which are apt not only to have an evil tendency in themselves, but to mingle the virtuous and vicious in each others society; nor for the improvement of the vicious, but rather to corrupt the virtuous. . . . And so far at least as the members of the church are concerned, we would advise that balls, dances, and other vain and useless
amusements be neither countenanced nor patronized; they have been borne with, in some instances heretofore for the sake of peace and good will. But it is not now a time for dancing or frolics but a time of mourning, and of humiliation and prayer.\textsuperscript{22}

This statement may appear to be a general indictment of dancing, and it certainly is a warning of the ill effects of worldly and unfettered revelry in the public dances. Yet subsequent events, as well as statements by Brigham Young, indicate that this deep concern was more for the time, place, and especially the environment in which dancing was done. President Young had to sort through a number of pros and cons about the practice of dancing. As previously noted, there was always the potential for worldliness and excess of frivolity that might distract people from important issues. On the other hand, within certain bounds and constraints, dancing was a commendable practice because of the exercise it gave, the sociality it promoted, and the social graces it engendered.

After weighing the one side against the other, Brigham Young concluded that in appropriate circumstances and atmosphere, dancing had a strong potential to be uplifting to the people. Using this rationale, he gave the practice of dancing a spiritual and intellectual coherence that enabled the pioneers to enjoy all of its benefits while limiting any ill effects that it might be perceived to have on their piety.

Brigham’s ideas about dance developed while the Saints were still in Nauvoo and ultimately shaped the ideals and forms of dancing among the Utah pioneers, from the time of crossing the plains to the founding of Salt Lake City and on to the establishment of settlements extending to the far reaches of the Great Basin. Saints were “encouraged to conduct and attend their own dances,”\textsuperscript{23} rather than to go to the places where public dances were held. In this way, they could control the atmosphere and thereby let the act (or art) of dancing be unhindered in filling its role as a wonderful means of recreation and wholesome social interaction. To be sure, controversy about dancing continued, even down into this century, but usually centered on whether the conditions of Brigham’s pronouncements were being met in actual practice.
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Under Brigham Young's approval, dancing resumed in Nauvoo\textsuperscript{24} and continued around evening campfires after a hard day on the pioneer trail. At Winter Quarters, a particularly discouraging time, Brigham Young is reported to have "called his people together and told them: 'I want you to sing and dance and forget your troubles. We must think of the future that lies ahead and the work which is ours.'"\textsuperscript{25} Rachel Simmons, who had moved from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters in 1846 as a young girl, mentions that the first dancing party she attended was on one of the few boats that ventured that far up the Missouri River:

I remember one came up and the officers gave a ball on landing and invited some of the young folks, myself among the number . . . . Mother consented and I had a delightful time. Previous to this I had been to dancing school and was considered by my teacher to be the best dancer in his school of one hundred scholars. I know that I like to dance today as well as ever I did in my young days. That was my first dancing party, but I have been to hundreds since, for the Saints are a dancing people and believe in engaging themselves in all legitimate pleasures.\textsuperscript{26}

A large farewell party and dance were given at Winter Quarters in honor of the Mormon Battalion prior to their departure for California. William Draper notes that "within twenty four hours the required no. 500 was more than made up, and there was immediately a large bowery was erected at a little [place] known as Trading Point settled only by Indians and their traders on the Bank of the Missouri there we had [a] jolly parting dance."\textsuperscript{27} Colonel Thomas Kane gives a fuller description of the event:

There was no sentimental affectation at their leave-taking. The afternoon before was appropriated to a farewell ball; and a more merry dancing rout I have never seen, though the company went without refreshments, and their ballroom was of the most primitive . . . . With the rest attended the elders of the church within call, including nearly all the chiefs of the high council, with their wives and children. They, the gravest and most trouble worn, seemed the most anxious of any to be first to throw off the burden of heavy thoughts. Their leading off the dancing in a great double cotillion, was the signal bade the festivity commence . . . . None of your minuets or other mortuary processions of gentles in etiquette, tight shoes, and pinching gloves, but the spirited and scientific displays of our venerated and merry grandparents, who were not above following the fiddle to the Foxchase Inn, or Gardens of Gray's Ferry.
Mormon Battalion Ball, July 1846, by C. C. A. Christensen (1831–1912); oil on canvas, 13 7/8" x 22 1/8". Prior to the departure of the Mormon Battalion from Winter Quarters, the beleaguered Saints quickly erected a bowery and gave a spirited farewell ball. Courtesy LDS Archives.
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French Fours, Copenhagen Jigs, Virginia Reels, and the like forgotten figures executed with the spirit of people too happy to be slow, or bashful, or constrained. Light hearts, lithe figures, and light feet, had it their own way from an early hour till after the sun had dipped behind the sharp sky line of the Omaha hills.28

Zadoc Judd, a member of the battalion, notes in his autobiography that even while on the march, dancing was one of the recreational activities among the predominantly male personnel and that it seemed to lift everyone’s spirits in spite of the lack of female company:

We travelled down the Missouri River for Fort Leavenworth; Happy and cheerful, singing and dancing. . . . There were several good fiddlers among us and some one had managed to get his fiddle stowed away in a captain’s wagon and after a hard day’s march, the fiddle was brought out and a lively dance would commence and would continue for the entire evening. There were no girls but many of the boys would take the girls side and do the dance all right. The boys did say it was the best way to rest and they felt better than they would to set down and sit still.29

The main migration of pioneers, including leaders, likewise engaged in musical and dancing activities after supper as a relief from the tedium and fatigue of the day’s journey. This activity took their minds off the cares and worries of the day, and in a convivial atmosphere, they were rejuvenated both mentally and physically and able to face the arduous requirements of the next day’s journey. Eliza R. Snow, who crossed the plains later in the summer of 1847, notes in her diary how singing hymns around a blazing campfire lifted the people’s hearts to a contemplation of the sublime:

Had it not been for the rich seasons of refreshing from above which we experienced from time to time, with renewing influence, it really seemed as though many must have yielded beneath the weight of fatigue and exposure, who were thus enabled to struggle through.30

Since the pioneers “had many a dance while on the plains,”31 numerous diaries and reminiscent accounts give us something of the flavor of those recreational activities: “Sometimes on week nights,” Harriett Pulipher recalls, “they would clear away the brush and engage in dancing.”32 “We enjoyed ourselves very much at the
last two places we camped,” Sophia Goodridge Hardy writes. “Had two violins in our ten. Had some music and dancing.” Jessie Belle Stirling Pack describes a typical evening on the trail:

We left Council Bluffs Aug. 15, 1862, and arrived in Salt Lake October 20, 1862. . . When we would camp we gathered buffalo chips and wood where we could and built our fire and cooked a little bacon. Then the boys would get their fiddles and we would clear off the brush and dance and sing Scotch songs. Then we would sing hymns and have prayers and go to bed.

“Another memory,” according to Mary Culmer Simmons, “is of moonlight nights when the camp was all settled and made safe; the people would gather around the campfire and after some singing and prayer, there would be dancing.” Mary Mole Smith chose to write about the positive aspects of the trek:

It is not my purpose to write of our wanderings in the wilderness; of the desert sands, the brackish waters, the hot sun by day and chill skies by night, illuminated by sagebrush fires; but rather to recall the evenings of song, of conversation, dancing and revels which closed each day.

From an anonymous author, we read, “No matter how difficult had been the journey during the day, when dusk came and the camp had been pitched, the evening meal eaten, the weariness of the day was forgotten in a dance.” Aroet Hale recalls that the 1848 companies of Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball traveled close together and that “they frequently Stop within a Mile or So apart. The Young yould [sic] Viset from One Camp to the Other. and frequently would get musick and have a good Dance on the Ground. Some times the Older Folks would Join with us.”

For some pioneer immigrants, dancing on the plains was an extension of activities they had participated in on the ships bringing them to America. Caroline Hopkins Clark, sailing on the ship *John Bright* from Liverpool, England, April 30, 1866, with 747 Latter-day Saints aboard, notes, “We have plenty of music and dancing on board. . . We had a concert and dancing on deck,” and later, while on the plains near the Platte River, she continues, “Yesterday was the anniversary of our people who first entered the valley. We traveled about half the day, then we had singing and dancing, and all enjoyed ourselves.”
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Wherever the immigrants camped, prayers and devotions customarily preceded or followed dancing, and the people were continually reminded of the noble purposes of their migration and the need to guard against frivolous or negative attitudes. Nevertheless, the frailties of human nature occasionally led to disturbances at the dances. In her diary, Eliza R. Snow notes that “last eve the young people met for a dance & bro. Baker’s boys & others intruded with much insolence—they are tried this eve before the bishop’s court.”

Brigham Young’s Views on Dancing

After the pioneers arrived in the Great Salt Lake Valley and began spreading out into numerous settlements, dancing continued as a favored activity. Mary Isabella Horne, who arrived in the valley in October 1847, three months after the first pioneers, notes that the first year was hard, but during the second year, “we had more time for amusements . . . , having our social parties, dancing parties, etc.”

Dancing always had the Church leaders’ blessing, but with it also came their admonishment to preserve a proper atmosphere and attitude. Every occasion was to be opened and closed with prayer, and the people were to be unrelentingly vigilant in keeping out worldly influences, particularly liquor, rowdy behavior, and suspicious strangers who might bring harm to the community. This type of setting is what Brigham Young envisioned as necessary for dancing to fulfill its raison d’être—providing the wholesome recreation requisite for physical, mental, and social growth.

In a speech entitled “Recreation and the Proper Use of It,” delivered at the Legislative Festival on March 4, 1852, Brigham Young once again articulated his view toward the practice of dancing:

I want it distinctly understood, that fiddling and dancing are no part of our worship. The question may be asked, What are they for, then? I answer, that my body may keep pace with my mind. My mind labors like a man logging, all the time; and this is the reason why I am fond of these pastimes—they give me a privilege to throw every thing off, and shake myself, that my body may exercise, and my mind rest. What for? To get strength, and be renewed and quickened, and enlivened, and animated, so that my mind may not wear out. . . . I do not wrestle, or play the ball; all the exercise I do get is to dance a little.
Speaking on another occasion, President Young emphasized that dancing under the right auspices was not only good for the people but was also as wholesome an activity as any sport—the only requirement for purity being a proper attitude:

If you want to dance, run a footrace, pitch quoits or play at ball, do it, and exercise your bodies, and let your minds rest... If you wish to dance, dance; and you are just as much prepared for a prayer meeting after dancing as ever you were, if you are Saints. If you desire to ask God for anything, you are as well prepared to do so in the dance as in any other place, if you are Saints. Are your eyes open to know that everything in the earth, in hell, or in heaven, is ordained for the use of intelligent beings?... Those who cannot serve God with a pure heart in the dance should not dance. 45

In the matter of the training and education of his own children, President Young said the following:

I had not a chance to dance when I was young, and never heard the enchanting tones of the violin, until I was eleven years of age; and then I thought I was on the high way to hell, if I suffered myself to linger and listen to it. I shall not subject my little children to such a course of unnatural training, but they shall go to the dance, study music, read novels, and do anything else that will tend to expand their frames, add fire to their spirits, improve their minds, and make them feel free and untrammeled in body and mind. 46

A number of times, President Young chastened the critics of dancing by offering the following opinions on the prevalent religious censure of fiddling and dancing: “Tight-laced religious professors of the present generation have a horror at the sound of a fiddle. There is no music in hell, for all good music belongs to heaven”; 45 “every decent fiddler will go into a decent kingdom”; 46 and “I have heard many a minister say that there were no fiddles in heaven. At that time I did not understand as I do now, for I now know that there are no fiddles in hell. There may be many fiddlers there, but no fiddles; they are all burned that go there.” 47

The fruits of Young’s policies in encouraging dancing are summarized nicely by his daughter, Susa Young Gates:

People would have had in those grinding years of toil, too few holidays and far too little of the spirit of holiday-making which is the spirit of fellowship and socialized spiritual communion, but for Brigham Young’s wise policy. He manifested even more godly inspiration in his carefully regulated social activities and associated
pleasure than in his pulpit exercises. He kept the people busy, gave legitimate amusements full sway and encouraged the cultivation of every power, every gift and emotion of the human soul. 38

In an article that appeared in the *Utah Musical Times* not long after Brigham Young's death, the authors list once again the positive aspects of dancing that were envisioned by President Young and that more or less reflect the popular attitudes toward dancing at the time:

A social dance is certainly one of the best things to drive away dull care, disperse sour and sombre feelings, dispel melancholy thoughts, banish hypochondriacal ideas, and infuse in a company a spirit of cheerfulness, geniality, affability, and kindly courtesy. It will also do much to abolish bashfulness, awkwardness, and boorishness in social intercourse . . . and to impart a more satisfying self-possession and ease and repose of deportment, and a very desirable self-collectedness of manner, when in company . . . Further than this, dancing is physically a most beneficial exercise, and if people generally were accustomed to dance frequently, but in moderation, there would not be so much heard of terrible suffering from indigestion, biliousness would be banished, and dyspepsia would measurable be destroyed. 39

Dancing in Utah Territory

The celebration dance on the Twenty-fourth of July 1868 in Coalville was typical of celebrations in territorial Utah:

At daybreak the citizens were serenaded by the brass and martial bands. At nine o'clock everyone was at the Church where speeches, singing and oration finished the forenoon program. At 2 p.m. dancing commenced and continued until the grey morning light dawned. All was peace and joy. 50

In keeping with Brigham Young's stated views about proper atmosphere, the pioneers strove to make their celebrations and their dances "harmonious," "well-ordered," and "conducted with decorum and propriety." Dances were opened and closed with prayer. A floor manager was employed to make things go smoothly—limiting the number of dancers to the space available and making sure that everyone who wanted to had a chance to dance. He was also arbitrator, arbiter, and occasionally bouncer as he sought to keep civility at a proper level. Sometimes dances were stopped because of unruly or untoward behavior. 51
Cello belonging to George Wardle. Wardle entertained the first 1847 pioneer company with his music as they traveled across the plains. On assignment from Brigham Young, Wardle taught dance classes in communities throughout pioneer Utah. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.
The sociality and community spirit engendered by dancing made the activity even more desirable. In a letter to his sister in England, John Barker writes, “We have been to several dancing parties and expect to go to more this winter, for all in the town mix together and enjoy each others company & friendship.”

Dances were for the whole family; so that no one need stay at home, even babes in arms were brought and put to sleep in bedrooms, on benches, or even in beds made on the floorboards of a carriage or wagon: “Often a lady was compelled to leave the floor—her baby was crying. No mother remained at home on account of children, except in cases of sickness. Babies were brought along and beds were arranged on seats with coats and shawls for coverings.” In this setting, there was no generation gap—children learned about being part of the community and the adult world and its expectations for them in the future. They also picked up a sense of dancing—its forms and steps.

Important elements of dancing included knowing the proper steps and the etiquette associated with dancing, such as properly asking a partner to dance and giving a correct thank-you. As early as 1850, Brigham Young asked George Wardle to conduct a dancing school so people would get proper training in the art of dancing. A wheelwright by trade, Wardle had been an “ardent student of music in his native England,” and thus equipped, he began instruction, first in Marcy Thompson’s log cabin and later in a dance hall he constructed in 1851 on Second West between North and South Temple. The hall was a social center for a number of years, and President Young and other leading Church authorities were among Wardle’s students. Eventually, President Young asked Wardle to go to Provo to start a dancing school and later to go to Midway for the same reason.

Knowing the proper dance steps was important, and, in order to enable everyone to participate, officiators commonly took time at a dance to teach the steps. As a resident of early Kanab reports, “Edwin Ford, who after 1873 played his violin at all dances, also called for the cotillions. It is said he expected the participants to dance the figures correctly, and if anyone made a mistake he would stop the music, give instructions, and then begin the music again.”
Though whole families attended community dances, on special holidays such as the Fourth or Twenty-fourth of July, Christmas, or New Year, an afternoon dance was often held just for children. During the 1876 Fourth of July celebration in Cedar City, there was “dancing by the children in the afternoon and by the adults in the evening. Peace and good order did everywhere abound throughout the whole day.” Of the same day in Paragonah, an observer writes, “We had a very pleasant celebration of the Fourth. . . . Dancing commenced at 1 o’clock for the children, and in the evening adults indulged in the same way, which was kept up until a late hour. The whole affair went off very pleasantly.” Another diarist in Mt. Carmel in Kane County wrote:

At two p.m. the little folks assembled and occupied a few hours in dancing. Then they gave way for the more elderly ones, who occupied the time to good advantage until midnight when the dance was dismissed and all went home in peace, feeling well satisfied.

While children’s dances were for the young ones’ amusement, they were also viewed by Church authorities as an opportunity to teach the steps as well as proper dancing manners and etiquette to the children. In a letter to the officers of the children’s Primary Association in Farmington, Aurelia Spencer Rogers, then the president of the association, requests such instruction: “I regret very much not being able to attend the children’s party, knowing they will have a fine time, especially if they observe good order. And to have order, there should be some regulations in regard to their dancing.” She then lays out in some detail a number of such regulations, which, if followed, would teach the children proper dancing habits and manners.

In a reminiscent account, Emma B. Lindsay remembers the setting in which Brigham Young conducted dances and also mentions his abilities as a dancer:

During the holidays, I well remember my father taking my sister Rebecca and me to a dance at the old Social Hall on State Street at Salt Lake City. . . . I remember seeing President Brigham Young, his fine appearance and how he danced. He was very light on his feet and good at dancing. I also remember the order maintained during the dance.
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Emmeline B. Wells notes that during President Young’s visits to the large home of Isaac Chase “there would soon be a Cotillion, Money Musk, Sir Roger de Coverley, or a Schottish Reel. Pres. Brigham Young was a famous dancer, and certainly one of the most graceful pictures of all those popular men of the olden time.”

As a child in Nephi, Utah, in the 1860s, Charlotte Evans Adams was thrilled when, at a party given in honor of his visit to that town, President Young “asked her to dance with him for he was such a graceful dancer, executing the intricate figures of the Lancers, quadrille, and Schottische so beautifully.” With regard to the benefits of dancing, the famed English traveler Richard Burton notes that among the Mormons “dancing seems to be considered an edifying exercise. The Prophet dances, the Apostles dance, the Bishops dance.”

Dancing Venues in Pioneer Utah

Lack of a large, enclosed space for dancing did not deter the pioneers from dancing. If nothing else was available, they would dance in the open air, but as time and means became available, they built various structures either specifically for dancing or for a variety of purposes, including dancing.

Boweries. Of necessity, dancing was an open-air activity during the trek across the plains, but as dancing continued to be a favored activity in the Great Salt Lake Valley, the Saints began to find more agreeable venues for their dances. The earliest pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley built two boweries—large, temporary structures that were basically arbors. The boweries were used for public functions, including dancing. The first notable event celebrated by the Saints in the valley was the “harvest feast” of 1848, held at the “second” bowery at about Fourth West and Fourth South. The harvest feast was a celebration and dance to give thanks for the fruits of the Saints’ labors of the first year in their new home.

On the 10th of August we held a public feast under a bowery in the center of our fort. This was called a harvest feast; we partook freely of a rich variety of bread, beef, butter, cheese, cakes, pastry, green corn, melons, and almost every variety of vegetable. Large sheaves of wheat, rye, barley, oats and other productions were hoisted on poles for public exhibition, and there was prayer and
thanksgiving, congratulations, songs, speeches, music, dancing, smiling faces and merry hearts. In short, it was a great day with the people of these valleys, and long to be remembered by those who had suffered and waited anxiously for the results of a first effort to redeem the interior deserts of America, and to make her hitherto unknown solitudes “blossom as the rose.”

Private Homes. As new pioneer settlements began to be established farther and farther from Salt Lake City, the settlers took with them the same expectations for dancing and other social occasions. Realizing the importance of entertainment as a means of keeping people's spirits high and of promoting community social cohesion, President Young chose the personnel for each pioneer company with a careful eye to providing a full complement of skills necessary for its success. Thus he selected not only a variety of artisans, but musicians as well; groups of Saints sent to settle an outlying area were seldom without a fiddler.

With few resources at first, dances and other parties took place in private homes. In fact, in both Salt Lake City and in the outlying communities, commodious homes of leading citizens furnished most of the dancing space. In Salt Lake City, the home of Isaac Chase, built in Liberty Park (ca. 1853–54), was a very popular site for parties and dancing, especially among young people. According to Emmeline B. Wells, the Chases were warm and hospitable hosts and entertained many guests and visitors, young and old, some of whom would just drop by:

At that time there were not many houses convenient for dancing, but the big kitchen, or living room at Chases', with its wide open fireplace, and big stout andirons with blazing logs across in winter-time and the great crane swung high, and the pot-hooks with kettles hanging, was a bright picture and when one came in cold from the sleigh, the fireplace was in itself like a great welcome. Sister Chase always had the spinning wheel, with some soft, white rolls, and the old fashioned reel with a skein of yarn on it, and the table put out of the way somewhere. The floors had no carpet to be removed, nor any waxing to be done, and if the fiddlers came, or even one, Jesse Earl, was sure to be there if there was to be a gathering of young folks, and it seems to me that John Gleason had a fiddle, too... There were no restrictions about time, and it was often in the early morning hours when the young people wended their way homeward.

Pioneer Emma B. Lindsay of Taylorsville records that “many dances were held at our home; the only music was that of the
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violin. Sometimes step dances were part of our entertainment. We also held dances at Wm. Parker's home. One room was all that they had. When the dance was held, beds and other furniture were taken out.” She also remembers other dances when “a mid-night supper was served and then dancing continued a while after. Some of the girls who had two dresses would change them at this point, and then finish the dance in a different attire.”

The dances often included not only the usual ones done in the United States, but also “step dancing’ or later, ‘Toe dancing’ when some of the old dances learned in Scotland or Ireland were danced by those who had learned them in their childhood.” In Tooele the Saints danced even when a fiddler was not available:

The first dancing party occurred in Bishop Rowberry’s house on Christmas Day 1849. Josiah Call whistled and someone had a Jews Harp, and that furnished the music. In the summertime a bowery was built and especially on the evenings of July Fourth and July 24th they danced, sometimes all night. The dances were opened and closed with prayer.

This reference to the music for the dance being furnished by a whistler is echoed by Charles R. Bailey in the following note in his diary in 1859:

In Wellsville we had a dance on Christmas night and New Years also; our meetinghouse was very small—14x16 and our music was very scarce only one violin and there was too many for the house so we divided up and one part went to Brother John Maughan’s house but when we got there we had no music so I was called to make music for the dance being a good whistler. I had to do my best. John Maughan and Brother Frank Gunnell did the calling. We had a good time all the same but in those days I could make as good music as a flute or piccolo.

Dancing was such an important social event that some people even built their homes with one especially large room to accommodate dancers. Josie Patterson notes that her father built such a home in Salt Lake City before being called to go to Arizona. Aaron Johnson, the first bishop of Springville, Utah, who settled the area with some thirty other families, “built a larger adobe house in the spring of 1852 . . . [that] was the only place for several years that was large enough for meetings, dances and public gatherings."“During the winter of 1852-53, . . . Johnson told the boys that if
they would furnish fuel and lights, his large front rooms could be used for dancing.”74 They immediately organized some sleds to carry the wood and after several trips to the forest had gathered a number of cords of firewood. Myrtle H. Conover records:

Levi Curtis secured the “Assembly Rooms” for cotilion parties which were held weekly during the winter. Levi and James O’Banion were the fiddlers. Old and young would gather for dancing; everybody came early and left about the midnight hour. The bedrooms opening from the hall were generally filled with babies snuggly tucked away, while the mothers enjoyed the dance. . . . The huge fireplaces at either end of the hall were piled high with dry cedar fagots, the flames from which, seemingly endowed with the spirit of the dance, leaped and danced up the chimneys with a roar that laughed the winter blasts to scorn. Candles held in place by three nails driven into wooden brackets were ranged high along the walls. . . . Tickets were paid for in any kind of produce that the fiddlers could be induced to accept. Usually a couple of two-bushel sacks could be seen near the door, into which the dancers deposited their contributions. . . . The New Year of 1853 was danced in with extra ceremony; more candles were furnished and another fiddler, William Smith, procured.75

The townspeople of Clarkston, on the Bear River, also contributed to a private home to make it suitable for dancing. Catherine H. Griffiths notes that in 1863 “when the people first settled Clarkston, they didn’t have any place for public gatherings. William Steward had the largest house in the settlement so the citizens told him that they would put in a lumber floor if he would let them use it for dances. This he did and the dancing began.”76

Further south, in Beaver, John Mathews “built his home knowing that he would be called upon to offer it for such purposes [dancing]. He built partitions between certain rooms that could easily be moved, making a larger space for dancing and other functions. Needless to say, many parties were held here.”77 When homes were used for dancing, the furniture and carpeting were all moved out, leaving room for one or two squares. Often the fiddler would stand in the doorway so that people in two or more rooms could hear the music.78

In the small community of Washington, near St. George, dance parties were held at private homes “until the large meeting house was built in 1877. Bishop Covington’s home had two stories; the upper story, which consisted of one big room with a fireplace, was
reached by an outside stairway; here dances could be held without people having to invade the privacy of Bishop Covington's living quarters."79

**Public Buildings.** As settlements became more established, churches and schoolhouses were built, and they became the places for dancing. Though many were small and some had dirt floors, the buildings sufficed for a people who would have their entertainment. A typical story was recorded in the community of Fillmore, where they completed the new schoolhouse in late 1851, and everyone attended the first dance:

It had one big room and was made of cottonwood logs with a large fireplace in one end, rude benches made of split logs and a dirt floor that was sprinkled and swept before each social event. On the evening of the first dance, the whole town turned out to enjoy the event. The light from the fireplace and candles revealed the happiness these early pioneers felt in thus being able to enjoy a sociable time together. Their hardships were forgotten for the time as the musicians tuned up their fiddles and banjos. The evening began with prayer, then Brother Hiram Mace, the dance master, taught some step-dancing to the younger people, after which everybody, old and young, joined in the square dancing.80

The occasional alternative to the dirt floor was one made of logs sawed lengthwise and laid closely together:

Sometimes a dance would be given in some home which boasted a "puncheon floor." Most floors were the hard-packed earth; but when the good man of the house possessed both gumption and logs, he could set sawed-off logs close enough in the dirt to make quite a respectable flooring, called puncheon. Then came the dance! It was some job, you may be sure, to turn a "pigeon wing" on that uneven, bumped-up surface. But it could be done and it was done.81

Orderville offers a view of how dances took place in that communal settlement. The large dining hall, where the whole community ate their meals in three shifts (first the men, then women, then children),82 became their dance hall. Charles William Carroll, who moved there in 1878, recalls:

We had dances in the dining hall. We would shove all the tables against the walls and shave soap on the floor to make it smooth. . . . We had good music for our weekly dances. Brother Covington and Lon Cox would trade off with the fiddle. That was all the instruments we had, but we thought it was great.83
Halls Built Primarily for Dancing. In addition to the bow-erries, during the first years in the valley an enclosed public space large enough to accommodate dancing was constructed at some hot-water springs located several miles north of the temple lot. The area was known as Warm Springs:

In the summer of 1850, a commodious bath house was built over the springs, boarding in one inner pool for women, an outer one for men and boys, with several private rooms fitted with wooden bath tubs. . . . The Bath House was dedicated with prayer and religious services on November 27, 1850. The morning service was followed by a great afternoon and evening celebration of feasting and dancing. . . . In front of this Bath House was an adobe cottage for the caretaker, and soon an immense dancing hall, also built of substantial adobe, was added, with a roomy dining-room and equipped with kitchens, all fitted with benches and tables. Public parties and even theatrical entertainments were given here, even after the completion of the Social Hall.84

The following July, Warm Springs was the site of a state ball and supper given in honor of the chief justice visiting the territory from the United States.85 At least one wedding also took place there that year, as described by the bride, Rachel Simmons:

We were married on the 18th of December 1851 in what was called the Warm Springs Bath House. It was at that time the largest and best place for large parties. It was a fashionable place. I had as nice a wedding as could be had in those days. . . . After the ceremony, we had supper, then danced until next morning.86

The most famous recreational facility of the early pioneers was the Social Hall, located on State Street in the center of Salt Lake City between South Temple and First South. It was a substantial building, measuring 40' x 80' and made of adobe with a shingle roof. The ground floor was used for theatricals and was built with a sloping floor leading down to the stage. The basement floor, on the other hand, was designed for dancing, parties, and banquets. The hall was formally opened and dedicated on New Year’s Day 1853, with Heber C. Kimball calling the meeting to order and Amasa Lyman offering the dedicatory prayer. There were congratulatory speeches, musical numbers, and recitations, but “a ball was the main feature of the evening.”87
Streetcar at the Warm Springs Bathhouse, ca. 1875. Built in 1850, Warm Springs provided public facilities for bathing and soon after for dancing as well. Courtesy LDS Archives.

On November 29, 1855, a special dance was held in the Social Hall to welcome back missionaries returning from foreign lands. Jedediah M. Grant of the First Presidency directed the proceedings, noting that

those missionaries that cannot dance, and do not try, we shall consider have not fulfilled their missions this evening. He then led off in the dance, which he executed in right good earnest. The whole company caught the electric spark, and “good earnest” characterized the exercises of the evening. . . . When the evening was well advanced, and the party had exercised themselves much in the dance, President Grant addressed the returned missionaries.88

As communities developed throughout the territory, buildings dedicated primarily to public entertainments gradually began to be built. Following the Warm Springs model, some were built next to water and featured trees, flowers, and lawns in garden settings where people could enjoy the natural beauty while partaking of good food and dancing. Many resorts with dancing pavilions were built around Utah Lake at American Fork, Pleasant Grove, Geneva, and Lincoln Beach, to name a few.
Social Hall, Salt Lake City, 1858. A ball was the highlight of the dedication of the Social Hall in 1853. The basement was designed for dancing and the ground floor was used for theatricals. Courtesy BYU Archives.

Near Manti in 1873, Daniel Funk even created a man-made lake by diverting the water of Six-Mile Creek into what was known as the Arapene Valley. Though it presented a number of engineering problems, in the end his lake covered seventy-five acres at a depth of twenty feet. In this previously dry area, he planted six thousand fruit and shade trees, as well as a variety of vegetables, notably sugarcane and melons. He built dance pavilions both on shore and over the lake where “the hard working people of southern Utah” could come for wholesome entertainment.89

In nearby Sevier county, a family-enterprise, do-it-yourself dance hall was constructed by musician Lars Nelson (later Neilson) in the mid-1880s. He had grown “tired of playing for entertainments in boweries, hay barns, log cabins, churches and large front parlors.”

The dance hall was a modest frame building about 100 feet long and 40 feet wide, facing west, overlooking the pasture lands. . . . The dance floor was made of smooth planed boards on which generous
amounts of candle wax was whittled, then polished to a slick gloss by the sliding, dancing feet. . . . The place was reached by following a narrow dirt road which hugged the curving mountainside from Glenwood to Annabelle.

The first ball was a rousing success. Curious people who had watched the building proceedings with growing interest came from surrounding towns, filling the hall to capacity. The hillside was covered with wagons, buggies, horses and mules. A strict dance manager allowed no rough antics to be carried on . . . although sometimes the quick quadrilles, whirling and jumping polkas might be considered rough. People came expecting amusement, and the Neilsons' reputation as entertainers fulfilled their expectations.90

This dance hall was unique in that the music was provided entirely by Lars and his family. Their antics and sheer musicianship contributed substantially to the hilarity and the entertaining atmosphere of the dances.91

One dance hall with a singularly unique building feature was the American Fork Opera House built in 1883. It was modeled

Saltair, ca. 1897–1900. The queen of all early Utah entertainment facilities, Saltair, located on the south shore of the Great Salt Lake, advertised the world’s largest dance floor. Courtesy BYU Archives.
Bathers at Saltair, ca. 1897-1900. Saltair, established by the Church in 1893, was intended to provide a wholesome family atmosphere for bathing by day and dancing by night. Courtesy BYU Archives.
somewhat after the Salt Lake Theater, built in 1862, and was constructed in a T-shape with each part measuring 40' x 80'.

[The] unique feature of the building was the movable floor which could be raised and lowered to accommodate the particular type of entertainment. . . . One end of the floor swung on a mammoth hinge secured in the front section of the foyer. Huge iron screw jacks, operated by hand, raised the opposite end of the floor flush with the stage area, thus permitting the full expanse of the stage floor and auditorium to be used for dancing and similar entertainments. When theatricals were to be presented, the auditorium floor was lowered on the same jacks.92

Opera houses were built in a number of other communities as well, and at least one, the St. George Opera House, shared the same feature of a moveable floor.93

In 1893 the queen of all pioneer entertainment facilities, Saltair, was built on the shores of the Great Salt Lake. It was the ultimate recreational resort for the area’s citizens, and in size and scope it had no peer in the United States at that time. The dancing pavilion itself was 140' x 250', with a roof supported by an iron framework that left no pillars or other obstructions on the floor. A railway brought hundreds of recreation seekers to Saltair daily, and activities continued into the night, since the structure was “lighted with 1,250 incandescent and forty arc lights, giving the place a fairylike appearance as they were reflected in the placid waters of the lake on a calm summer night.”94

Pioneer Dance Music

The music used in dancing consisted largely of traditional tunes from Scotland and Ireland, where they had accompanied reels, jigs, and hornpipes. These were lively tunes in either duple time ($\frac{2}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{4}$) or triple time ($\frac{9}{8}$), and they were played primarily on the fiddle, accompanied occasionally by whatever other instruments might be available, including the accordion, flute, guitar, reed organ, harmonica, or banjo. In the absence of any of these instruments, whistling or even humming through a comb covered with paper might be employed. In Salt Lake City were several wind bands that often provided music for dancing.

The fiddle, however, was undoubtedly the instrument of choice because of its large repertoire of tunes and because, as an instrument,
it offered those things most necessary for dancing: a clear and carrying sound; droning, which gave a semblance of harmony; and, just as importantly, a driving rhythm that gave dancers the impetus to move their feet. To be sure, fiddlers ranged tremendously in talent from those who could merely scrape out a tune to those whose music had the touch of the artist. But the sound of a fiddle worked magic in the minds of those who loved a dance; the better the fiddler, the more profound the inspiration for dancing and its enjoyment. Mosiah Hancock tells the following story about his father, Levi, who was not only a fine fiddler but was also something of “a fancy dancer” himself:

While on a mission in Indiana, he stopped at a building where 400 people had gathered to dance. The man who was to furnish the music could not get his violin to work. Father’s shoes were gone, and his pants were holey at the knees and behind, but he stepped up to the man and asked him what was the matter with his goose. Father took the thing and tuned it and made it fairly sing! The people danced until satisfied; then one of the men suggested that they get father a new suit, hat, and boots because he had fixed the violin and because they had had so much enjoyment. So they bought him a new suit, hat and boots!95

All this for the sound of a good fiddler.

K. C. Kartchner, another fine old-time fiddler who lived at the end of the pioneer period,96 recorded a similar incident that took place in the Manzano Forest in New Mexico. He was sent to deal with a group of people who were adamantly opposed to a new government regulation relating to their grazing animals in the forest. They had recently become extremely upset by ensuing rumors that they were to be removed from their homesteads. As a forest supervisor, Kartchner’s duty was to allay their fears and convince them to listen to his explanation of the new regulations. His ranger’s uniform, however, was like a red flag, and they would hardly give him the time of day.

[People] were literally up in arms, carrying Winchesters at work and threatening to use them. . . . Among the belligerents was a bachelor and World War I veteran from Texas, known as Red Pickens. Noticing a flock of chickens on his place, we stopped to buy some fresh eggs since our food supplies were getting short. He had been playing a violin that lay open on the kitchen table. Completing the egg deal,
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The Ether Blanchard family, Springville, Utah, 1902. Left to right: Achilles Blanchard, Ether and Sylvia Blanchard, and Margaret Goff. Achilles holds the homemade harp he constructed from a bicycle frame; his father holds his fiddle. The instruments were important enough to the Blanchards to be included in this formal family portrait. Photo by George Edward Anderson. Courtesy BYU Archives.

I asked him to play a piece, as we were both fond of the violin. It took some urging to get him started, but when I called for old-time pieces that should be foreign to “Guv’ment Men” his reluctance waned. A two-hundred pounder with red hair and freckles, he clomped his number twelves to the tempo on the kitchen floor. We voiced delight and he was pleased.

When Red Pickens inquired how I became familiar with old-time fiddle tunes, [my companion] Laney said, “Why don’t we have the supervisor play some himself?” “Why, shore thing,” said Red, with some astonishment. His fiddle was not much and the bow was patched up with wire, but after a series of hoedowns, some he did not play, we became choice guests. “We must stay for lunch and play some more fiddle.”
Pickens’s great surprise that the rangers could be so down-to-earth changed his attitude; his antipathy toward these “Gov’ment Men” dissolved, and he became extremely interested in the new regulations, asking innumerable questions to clarify all points. Since he “knew everybody in the neighborhood” because of his fiddling and his forceful personality, Pickens was influential in getting others to listen to the rangers’ message. In the end, Kartchner notes, “the hostility died down and little trouble was encountered thereafter”—again, all because of the sound of the fiddle.

The power of the fiddle to attract people is illustrated in an anecdote by Kartchner’s daughter, Merle. As a young child in Snowflake, Arizona, she was put to bed in the buggy outside the schoolhouse, where a dance was being held. Merle remembers seeing shadowy forms standing just outside the circle of light coming through the windows. Apparently, even though these people may have been extremely shy or, more likely, they did not want to be seen, the drawing power of the fiddle music was such that they would come to the dance anyway, if only to listen from the shadows.  

A Touch of Elegance on the Frontier

The lively nature of the dances—reels, jigs, two-steps, marches, and quadrilles—required lively music. Little wonder then that one attractive aspect of dancing was the exercise it gave its participants. On the horizon, however, was a dance that was destined to have a great impact on the pioneers and bring to them both controversy and a touch of elegance that was lacking in the more vigorous forms of dancing. The dance was the waltz with its attendant set of variations.

The waltz arrived in the United States about the turn of the nineteenth century and soon became popular. However, it was met immediately with cries of outrage and shock at the untoward familiarity of a couple dancing in closed position, closely facing each other—especially if they were not married or were married to someone else. For some, including many social arbiters, the dance was simply vulgar. For the moralists and clergy, its consequences were more dire: “When the young gentlemen put their arms about the ladies’ waists and whirled them about the room, the older
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generation warned the girls that they would lose all modesty and self-respect, and predicted where such intimacies would lead.100 This kind of controversy followed the waltz wherever it went.

There was also a second type of criticism, not of the dance itself, but rather of the simplistic way in which it was being taught and danced. This criticism came from numerous dancing masters whose life’s work had been to teach not only the dance steps, but more particularly the graceful use of the body while dancing. For them dancing was not just the proper steps, but rather a discipline to develop strength of muscle and grace of carriage and bearing, which in turn would lead to the cultivation of the social graces that attend people of culture. The waltz steps themselves were not difficult to learn, and upstart teachers of the waltz and the popular dance crowd seemed satisfied to learn only the steps. Thus, a whole host of the other important little things that were supposed to accompany dancing lessons—the cultivation of which led to airs and graces—were never learned, and this deficit was anathema to the traditional dancing masters.

The older Utah pioneers knew about the waltz and frowned on it as being in poor taste. To their generation, it was absolutely scandalous, but for the younger set it was an intriguing dance requiring strength and grace, but, more to the point, it allowed a new familiarity between the sexes as they danced. In his account of dances in the town of Fillmore in the 1850s, Dean Robison notes that in the first dances held in the newly completed schoolhouse “everybody, old and young, joined in the square dancing. Only dances that required the gentleman to take the hands or one arm of his lady were allowed. At this time waltzing was considered in poor taste, as it permitted too much familiarity between partners.”101 Sometime later, thanks to two young men who had spent some time in Salt Lake City, the waltz was introduced to Fillmore:

Two lads, Wise and Leigh Cropper . . . had been to Salt Lake City attending school and were eager to demonstrate a new dance they had learned. . . . The Dan Olson Orchestra . . . played the music “Blue Danube Waltz,” and the first waltz ever danced in Millard County was expertly executed by the two Cropper boys and their partners. It was the first time a boy had ever been allowed to take a girl in his arms when dancing. Before the evening was over, everyone in the hall had tried the new dance.102
There were frequent admonitions from the pulpit against the waltz, and in many places it was censured and stopped altogether. By 1876. . . .

In Bear River, for example,

the Retrenchment Association was organized in January 1876. . . .
By the end of the first year, there was an enrollment of sixty-seven members. . . . At their second meeting it was voted, unanimously, to discontinue “round dances” [the waltz and like dances].

In Snowflake, Arizona, in 1881, Jesse N. Smith, president of the Eastern Arizona Stake (name changed to Snowflake Stake in 1887) called the waltz “the dance of death.” After returning from a visit to his old hometown of Parowan, Utah, and having seen their dancing practices, he not only gave his opinion that “we had lost more than we had gained by dancing,” he also took action:

Notwithstanding the partial permit of Pres. [John] Taylor I felt to use my influence against round dancing [here]. . . . [I] asked the people to use their influence against round dancing and against excessive dancing. . . . Musicians in the Church who played for round dancing were accessory thereto.

Smith was undoubtedly alluding to a statement on round dancing issued in what was known as the “Epistle of the Apostles” some four years earlier over the signature of President John Taylor: “We do not wish to be too restrictive in relation to these matters, but would recommend that there be not more than one or two permitted in an evening.”

Typical of most areas of the Great Basin, the pioneers in northern Arizona were divided along age lines about the waltz. The older people opposed it, while the younger people favored allowing the waltz at the dances, as may be seen from the following diary entry regarding the waltz in the St. Joseph Ward of the Snowflake Stake:

[In] February (1893), several of the young men of the St. Joseph Ward petitioned the Bishopric to allow waltzing in their dances. . . . Their petition, circulated among the young people and children had 41 signers. To counteract this, the Relief Society got up a petition to the Bishopric not to grant the petition for waltzing. Their petition contained the most signers.

In the late 1890s, in President Jesse Smith’s own hometown of Snowflake, the waltz had a similar allure:
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It appealed greatly to the younger set, and frequently teenagers would sneak over to a large cement slab in front of the Co-op Store [A.C.M.I.] . . . and dance the waltz surreptitiously to the accompaniment of Kartchner's fiddle.108

Obscured by all the raucous contentions over the waltz was the elegance of the music and of the dance itself when done well. Waltz music differed substantially from the lively tunes used for the reels and quadrilles. It was smoother flowing, sweeter sounding, and moved at a more graceful tempo, calling to mind the beauty of music rather than a driving rhythm. The feeling of variety that the waltz music brought was as welcome as the dance itself.

Over a period of some years, resistance to the waltz and its music gradually faded, and soon after the turn of the century, as the pioneer period came to a close, the dance became universally popular. Its potential for showing "the graceful use of the body and the [proper] deportment of the ballroom"109 became increasingly apparent, inspiring people's efforts to learn to waltz properly. In many areas, the ability to waltz well became almost a visual index of a person's attainment of social grace. The daughter of a pioneer family in Snowflake, Arizona, where pioneer conditions continued into the first decades of this century, Merle K. Shumway frames the popular thought of her generation: "A man was not thought to be all he ought to be if he could not waltz well."110

Shumway further states that in her small frontier community, even in her childhood, the waltz and its derivatives, such as the Chicago Glide and Rye Waltz, were graceful dances that gave expression to frontier desires to partake of elegance—to be a part of something more elevated than their mundane, workaday world. She mentioned in particular the Chicago Glide as a typical example of a graceful dance setting an elegant ambiance.

The Chicago Glide featured couples in a circle executing graceful promenading, bowing, and foot-pointing figures interspersed with longer sections of waltzing. The first parts were done either in a duple meter or a slow 3/4 meter with extensive rubato. As the music went into waltz time, the couples moved across the floor, turning in keeping with the music until the last four measures, when the lady began a series of twirls under the extended
arm of the man. As the musical phrase ended, the couple returned to their position side by side in the circle and began all over again.

Merle Shumway’s memory of this dance is of ladies in their best, long-flowing dresses dancing in a hall lighted with coal-oil lamps. She describes the dance as a thing of great beauty, which, despite the homespun quality of the scene, lifted the frontier spirits in a way very different from the more vigorous reels and quadrilles that gave a more natural vent to exuberance and robustness. Apparently the waltz, with its flowing movements and smooth fiddle music, brought a much-sought-after touch of grace and elegance to that part of the frontier, which in turn brought beauty and meaning to the lives of the settlers.

The Passing of the Pioneer Period

As the pioneer period faded and Utah society moved into mainstream American life, dancing remained as a mainstay of community activity in Mormon communities, though its accompanying music began to change. In the more remote areas, the fiddle continued to be the principal source of dance music, but in more established areas, additional instruments began to appear alongside the fiddle. The Lars Neilson family band included at least ten children. Along with their father, the children played the clarinet, violin, banjo, guitar, triangle and drums, organ, trombone, E-flat cornet, D-flat cornet, alto horn, bass horn, and bass viol. “All were trained on several instruments and could substitute for each other. At times they would divide their group, some playing while the others danced.” Organs, guitars, and banjos were well suited to accompanying the fiddle, but as the piano became more widely available, it began to take a much larger role in providing dance music because of the large tonal resources at its command.

Although ensembles still played many of the old tunes by ear, they began to rely more and more on new tunes learned from sheet music that could be ordered from catalogs. With the advent of radio and recordings, the once-remote jazz and other types of eastern, big-city, popular music became accessible to Utah audiences, resulting in the gradual replacement of the once-popular fiddle music with new tunes played by ensembles.
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Interestingly, pioneer-type dances continued well into the mid-twentieth century in a number of Great Basin areas, stretching from Idaho to Arizona, and they remain in the memory of many of the generation born before 1940. Since 1985, folklorist Craig Miller of the Utah Arts Council has been actively engaged in field research in Utah communities where this tradition persists. He has discovered that the early music is still played in communities at special occasions commemorating town history, and occasionally dances are organized as well, providing some transmission of pioneer cultural practices to the younger generation, if only as artifacts of the past.

In addition, Miller has also documented at least two communities where such dances still function as an integral part of community life, places where the old community dance is a vital part of the present—Bluffdale, a few miles south of Salt Lake City, and Colorado City in southern Utah. Except for a few modern touches, such as the new cars parked outside the hall and the clothing style of the participants, an outsider attending their dances might feel transported back in time to the last century.

Fortunately, this heritage of dance music and social dance, although somewhat neglected, is not destined to be forgotten. In 1996, after more than a dozen years conducting fieldwork throughout the state, the Utah Arts Council produced a ninety-minute cassette tape entitled An Old-Time Utah Dance Party: Field Recordings of Social Dance Music from the Mormon West.114 An edited, seventy-two-minute version of that tape is on a compact disc inserted in this issue of BYU Studies. The Arts Council research has been conducted not only to preserve the data and to document cultural practices of the past for folklorists and historians, but also to create a resource for dancers, musicians, community activists, and other persons interested in reviving these dances and the sense of community they once engendered. Perhaps the Mormon tradition of social dance will survive, not only in the memories, but also in the experience of twenty-first-century Utahns.

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https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss3/2
NOTES


2The term fiddle is generally understood as an old generic term for bowed lutes, in this case for violins. There is no substantial difference between a fiddle and a violin, though occasionally the former are homemade and thus of a somewhat rougher workmanship. “Fiddling” refers specifically to a style of playing the violin in which there are techniques, particularly in the bowing, which account for the fiddle “sound.” Fiddle music is characterized by pervasive offbeat accents and often droning, which is playing the melody on one string with the bow also touching another, usually open, string.

3Warren Foote, Autobiography, typescript, 36, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as BYU Archives).

4Hosea Stout, Diary (1845), typescript, vol. 2, 25, BYU Archives.


9Marks, America Learns to Dance, 21; see also 19-22.

10Marks, America Learns to Dance, 62.

11Luman Shurtliff, Autobiography, typescript, 11, BYU Archives.

12Hamm, Music in the New World, 69. See also Andrew Karl Larson, I Was Called to Dixie (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1961), 458-60.


15Gilbert Belnap, Autobiography, typescript, 13, BYU Archives.


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18 "To the Editor of the Times and Seasons," Times and Seasons 5 (March 1, 1844): 459.

19 "To the Editor," 459-60.

20 "To the Editor," 460.


22 Brigham Young, "An Epistle of the Twelve, to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—Greeting," Times and Seasons 5 (October 1, 1844): 669.


24 It is not clear exactly when the Saints resumed dancing in Nauvoo, but Brigham Young records one interesting incident of dancing in the Nauvoo Temple on December 29, 1845:

The labors of the day [in the temple] having been brought to a close at so early an hour, viz.: eight-thirty, it was thought proper to have a little season of recreation, accordingly Brother Hanson was invited to produce his violin, which he did, and played several lively airs accompanied by Elisha Averett on his flute, among others some very good lively dancing tunes. This was too much for the gravity of Brother Joseph Young who indulged in dancing a hornpipe, and was soon joined by several others, and before the dance was over several French fours were indulged in. The first was opened by myself with Sister Whitney and Elder Heber C. Kimball and partner. The spirit of dancing increased until the whole floor was covered with dancers, and while we danced before the Lord, we shook the dust from off our feet as a testimony against this nation. (Joseph Smith Jr., History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev. 7 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971], 7:557.)


27 William Draper, Autobiography, typescript, 25, BYU Archives.


29 Zadoc Judd, Autobiography, typescript, 22, 26, BYU Archives.


33 Sophia Goodridge Hardy, Diary, quoted in Carter, Our Pioneer Heritage, 15:254.


Aroet Hale, Diary, typescript, 17, BYU Archives; [sic] in typescript.

Caroline Hopkins Clark, Diary, quoted in Carter, Our Pioneer Heritage, 10:43–44, 47.

Snow, quoted in “Utah Pioneer Recreation Centers,” 8:430. For other references to rowdy or improper behavior and its consequences, see Larson, I Was Called to Dixie, 458–60; and Kartchner, Frontier Fiddler, 158–60.


Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 2:94, February 6, 1853.

Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 9:244, March 6, 1862.

Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 8:178, September 9, 1860.

Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 10:313, June 10, 11, 12, and 13, 1864.

Gates, The Life Story of Brigham Young, 266.

Utah Musical Times 2 (February 1, 1878): 169.


See Larson, I Was Called to Dixie, 458–60; and Kartchner, Frontier Fiddler, 158–60.


Lest We Forget the Pioneer Christmas,” in Carter, Our Pioneer Heritage, 15:195.


George Wardle—Musician,” 2:492.

Kane County,” in Carter, Our Pioneer Heritage, 8:470.


Centennial Celebrations,” 20:14.


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70"That They May Be Remembered," 18:164.
72Matilda Josephine Anderson Patterson, "Personal Journal and Other Writings of Matilda Josephine Anderson Patterson," typescript, 3, copy in possession of author.
75Conover, "Springville," 8:488–89.
78Merle Kartchner Shumway, personal communication with author, summer 1987.
79Larson, *I Was Called to Dixie*, 458.
80Dean Chesley Robison, "Utah Pioneer Recreation Centers," 8:473.
91Fackrell, "Sevier County," 8:478.
95Mosiah Hancock, Autobiography, typescript, 14, BYU Archives.
The exact time of the passing of the pioneer period varied from place to place. It should be understood that in remote settlements, especially those in Nevada and Arizona, pioneer conditions continued into this century. While many of these communities had been established for some twenty years by the turn of the century, the general outlook and the quality of life was decidedly frontier and pioneer. This was so until WWI, which was also about the time when electricity, that harbinger of modernity, came into general use in these areas.

Kartchner, Frontier Fiddler, 238-39.

Kartchner, Frontier Fiddler, 239-40.

Shumway, personal communication.

Marks, America Learns to Dance, 76.


Organization of the Stakes and the Central Board, Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association—1893,” in Carter, Our Pioneer Heritage, 13:166.


Quoted in Larson, I Was Called to Dixie, 461. The context of this quote was a set of rules laid down by the St. George Stake high council to govern dancing in the stake, one of which stated their opposition to “round dancing, and in regard to waltz, schottische, or polka, or any other dance embracing the features of these dances” (461).


Kartchner, Frontier Fiddler, xviii.

Marks, America Learns to Dance, 76.

Shumway, personal communication.

Shumway, personal communication.

See note 96.

Fackrell, “Sevier County,” 8:479.

In the summer of 1998, a companion booklet will be available that discusses the role of dance as it has been lovingly handed down from generation to generation. The booklet, Social Dancing in the Mormon West, includes an essay by Utah Arts Council folklorist Craig R. Miller, which summarizes the community-based dance traditions that evolved in Utah and places these traditions in the unique context of Utah geography and culture. Another essay by ethnomusicologist Larry V. Shumway discusses how the Mormon pioneers’ love for music and dance laid the foundation that enriched subsequent generations. The booklet is illustrated with more than three dozen photographs from the Arts Council Archives of community-dance musicians and dancers, as well as images of the state’s best-loved outdoor dance halls. Perhaps most significant are the musical transcriptions, prepared by Shumway, that make the dance tunes accessible to musicians who wish to revive the music for their own community dances. For further information, write the Utah Arts Council, 617 East South Temple, Salt Lake City, UT 84012, or call 801-533-5760.